

## THE RIGHT TO REST

A commentary on *Parashat Va'Etchanan*

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*Parashat Va'Etchanan* is a rich source for looking at human rights. Spanning Deuteronomy 3: 23 – 7:11, the whole of this *Parasha* is voiced by Moses, as he recounts the story of the Israelites in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt. In looking at human rights, we might examine the value of the cities of refuge (Dt 4:41-43) or the legal status of covenantal relationship or, as Moses is explicitly denied entry into the land of Israel by G-d as a punishment (Dt 3:23-28), what the suitability of particular punishments for particular crimes. But the real centrepiece of this parasha is the recounting of the ten commandments in Dt 5: 6-18, which simply cannot be ignored in a discussion of human rights.

In particular, I would like to focus on one of the key differences between the ten commandments as listed here in Deuteronomy and the list as it first appears in Exodus. Famously as we know from the *Lecha Dodi* prayer we sing on Friday evenings, the biblical text presents us with a problem in the fourth commandment. In Ex 20: 8 we are enjoined to *zachor*, remember, the Shabbat day to keep it holy; whereas *Parashat Va'etchanan* in Dt 5:12 we are commanded to *shamor*, guard the Shabbat day to keep it holy. Moreover, the rationale is different in these two texts. In Exodus we remember the Shabbat because G-d rested on the 7th day of creation; in other words, we remember

Shabbat in an act of *imitatio Dei* (imitation of G-d). In Deuteronomy, we guard Shabbat because we were once slaves in Egypt and G-d freed us; therefore, G-d commands us to observe Shabbat. Essentially, we guard Shabbat as a day of rest, because as slaves we had no rest. Through this commandment G-d teaches us the human need for rest.

In fact, both the Deuteronomy and Exodus renditions of this commandment make explicit the fundamental need for, perhaps even right to, rest. Both texts tell us not only do we need to rest, but also our extended family (sons and daughters, spouses and partners), people who work for us (in the language of the Hebrew Bible our servants of both genders), strangers who reside among us, and even beasts of burden. Any living creature that works requires regular rest periods. We are all equal in this matter.

Living as we do in a modern, late capitalist society where job insecurity is rife particularly among the poorest members of society with the ensuing pressure to be available for any sort of work whenever it might appear and a culture of 7-day week, 24-hour day shopping is increasingly the norm for all of us, the

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could not be a timelier human rights message. It is a message we must remember and guard if we are to continue to work for a society in which we all can thrive.